

George Parker, First
Financial Times
23 April 2012

IN THE MATTER OF AN INQUIRY UNDER THE INQUIRIES ACT 2005
INTO THE CULTURE, PRACTICES AND ETHICS OF THE PRESS

**WITNESS STATEMENT OF
GEORGE PARKER**

I, **GEORGE PARKER**, Political Editor of the Financial Times, c/o 1 Southwark Bridge, London SE1 9HL, **WILL SAY AS FOLLOWS:**

1. I am George Parker, Political Editor of the Financial Times since 2007.
2. I make this statement in compliance with a Notice sent to me on 5 April 2012 pursuant to section 21(2) of the Inquiries Act 2005.
3. In this statement I have answered the questions raised in the Notice in good faith and to the best of my knowledge and belief. I believe my answers to be true. I am happy to expand on any answer if required to do so.
4. Nothing in this statement should be taken to waive privilege in any legal advice that I have received.

Question 1: Who you are and a brief summary of your career history.

5. Before assuming my role as FT Political Editor in 2007 I was the FT's Brussels bureau chief (2002-2007) and the FT's UK news editor (1999-2002). I began reporting at

Westminster for the Western Morning News (1990-95) and worked as a junior member of the FT's political team from 1995-99.

Question 2: How the dynamic of the relationship between politicians and the media has developed over recent years, what effect this has had on public life, and how far that has been beneficial or detrimental to the public interest. The Inquiry is particularly interested in the following themes – some of which are developed in further questions below – among others:

- a. **the conditions necessary for a free press in a democracy to fulfil its role in holding politicians and the powerful to account – and the appropriate legal and ethical duties and public scrutiny of the press itself when doing so. The inquiry would like the best examples – large or small – of the press fulfilling this role in the public interest;**
- b. **the nature of professional and personal relationships between individual senior politicians on the one hand, and the proprietors, senior executives and senior editorial staff of national newspapers on the other; including matters such as:**
 - i. **frequency and context of contacts;**
 - ii. **hospitality given and received, and any social dimension to the relationship;**
 - iii. **the perceived balance of advantages, including the ability of politicians and journalists to promote or damage each other's fortunes and reputation at a personal level;**
 - iv. **selectivity and discrimination – as between titles on the one hand, and as between political parties on the other;**
- c. **the economic context within which the media operate, and politicians' ability to influence that;**
- d. **media influence on public policy in general, including how that influence is exercised, with what effect, how far the process is transparent and how far it is in the public interest;**
- e. **media influence on public policy having a direct bearing on their own interests, and the effectiveness of the media as lobbyists;**
- f. **the extent and accuracy of the perception that political journalism has moved from reporting to seeking to make or influence political events, including by stepping into the role of political opposition from time to time;**

- g. politicians' perceptions of the benefits and risks of their relationships with the press and how they seek to manage them, including collectively at party level, through No.10 and other government communications organisations, and in the operation of the Lobby system;**
 - h. the extent and limitations of politicians' willingness and ability to constrain the media to conduct, practices and ethics which are in the public interest, whether by legislation, by regulatory means or otherwise.**
- 6. There has always been a symbiotic relationship between political journalists and politicians: we both need each other. Politicians have always tried to manipulate that relationship to their advantage: our duty is to resist. The balance of that relationship can tilt in favour of the politicians at times when governments enjoy a strong parliamentary majority, when they will try to exert pressure on journalists by limiting access to information and ministers if a journalist is seen to be "unhelpful". In my experience, this attempt at control was most obvious during the early years of the Blair government. At times of weak government (the Major years and the dying days of the Brown administration) or in times of coalition, the press can be at its most effective in performing its role of holding the powerful to account.
- 7. British journalism, in my opinion, has helped to ensure that the British political system is one of the cleanest in the world. The lobby's "pack" mentality can be a weakness - at times it leads to "group think" - but it is devastating in unearthing political wrongdoing and exposing weaknesses in policy and hypocrisy among our leaders. The Daily Telegraph's exposé on MPs' expenses is an obvious recent case in point. But the intense scrutiny given to weak government policy also improves governance - a topical example being the focus on the Budget and its measures covering everything from pasties to philanthropy. British political journalists were far better at assessing the case for war in Iraq than their US counterparts.
- 8. My experience as a reporter in Brussels persuaded me that British politicians were more likely to be across their brief - and better able to communicate it - than many of their continental counterparts because of their exposure to a vigorous and probing press (along with the particular demands of operating in the cockpit of the House of Commons).
- 9. Political journalists meet politicians in a variety of contexts including in "social" formats such as regular lunches and dinners. These are not normally disclosed on an official basis by journalists. Some of these working relationships may come to be seen as "friendships" but I have always seen these as being ultimately professional in nature. Although I cannot

speak for others, it seems to me that a journalist has crossed a line if a relationship with a politician prevents him or her from doing a professional job and writing the truth.

10. If politicians become valuable sources of exclusive information, there is a tendency for the journalist receiving that information to be favourable in their coverage of the politician concerned. This manifested itself particularly in the last Labour government when information was hoarded at the centre and often fed to "friendly" journalists; the transparency inherent in coalition government (and the manifold sources of information) has diluted this phenomenon.
11. Discrimination by those in power towards politically supportive news organisations clearly happens, although not always as one might expect. The Brown administration, for example, often appeared more anxious to court politically troublesome news organisations such as the Daily Mail or The Sun, than traditionally supportive papers on the left. A glance at the list of political editors invited to Chequers by Gordon Brown illustrates this point.
12. Political journalists are sometimes asked to write stories that reflect the interests (commercial or otherwise) of their proprietors although this has never been asked of me either by the FT or the Western Morning News. To that extent some political journalism is explicitly aimed at shaping policy - for example the Telegraph's relentless campaign against new government planning laws or the Times's recent campaign for cycle safety - but this is a longstanding function of the British press. During the early Blair years, the press operated as virtually the only effective check on an all-powerful executive.
13. My experience is that this government has been relatively "straight" in its dealings with the media and that neither No. 10 nor other government communications departments have developed a "white commonwealth" of favoured news outlets or correspondents for the selective briefing of important policy. I have never felt my work curtailed by either actual or threatened government action to regulate the activities of the press. Politicians tread very carefully in this area. If the press feels cowed by the prospect of any reforms flowing from the Leveson Inquiry, that is hardly reflected in the across-the-board negative or hostile coverage of the Budget and other aspects of government policy in recent weeks.

Question 3: What are the specific benefits to the public to be secured from a relationship between senior politicians at a national level and the media? What are the risks to the public interest inherent in such a relationship? How should the former be maximised, and the latter minimised and managed? Give examples.

14. The British public is remarkably well informed about what is really going on at Westminster, thanks in large part to the close working relationship between journalists and politicians. For example, the recent coverage of the preparation of the Budget was so comprehensive that the Treasury was forced to give a statement to the Commons on how so much of the statement came to be leaked. There is clearly a complicity on both sides of this relationship - politicians want to get information out just as much as journalists seek it. But much of the pre-Budget reporting was not the result of any deliberate leaking but simply good work by journalists in giving readers an in-depth account of policy-making at the highest and most sensitive level.
15. The risk to the public interest is that journalists are "used" by politicians to put out unbalanced or false information. This is less likely to occur than one might imagine: journalists from other publications are always keen to rubbish inaccurate or toadying stories by their colleagues. Professional pride as well as the application of professional standards are the best guard against this.

Question 4: Would you distinguish between the position of a senior politician in government and a senior politician in opposition for these purposes? If so, explain how, and why.

16. Not really. We rely on senior politicians from both government and opposition parties for information and the same principles would apply.

Question 5: What are the specific benefits and risks to the public interest of interaction between the media and politicians in the run up to general elections and other national polls? Do you have any concerns about the nature and effect of such interactions, or the legal, regulatory or transparency framework within which they currently take place, and do you have any recommendations or suggestions for the future in this regard? Please include your views on how you think the relationship between the media and politicians changes in the run up to elections, the extent to which a title's endorsement is related to particular policies, and whether the public interest is well-served as a result.

17. Politicians seek the approval of news organisations (or at least seek to manage the relationship with implacable enemies) at all stages of the political cycle. In election times that relationship becomes more intense - viz the Sun's withdrawal of support from Labour at the 2009 Labour conference. I have no direct experience of news organisations seeking policy concessions from political parties in general election campaigns.

Question 6: What lessons do you think can be learned from the recent history of relations between the politicians and the media, from the perspective of the public interest? What changes, voluntary or otherwise, would you suggest for the future, in relation to the conduct and governance of relationships between politicians and the media, in order that the public interest should be best served?

18. The excessive proximity of politicians and the executives/senior journalists of a single media group was clearly not in the public interest, as has been widely acknowledged. Transparency is the most effective means of ensuring that the necessary relationship between politicians and senior media figures can continue on a professional basis and to allow the public to form their own opinions on whether public policy is being weighted in favour of a commercial interest. Regulation of routine meetings between journalists and politicians could act against the public interest and deter politicians from passing on sensitive information which ought to be in the public domain.

Question 7: Would you distinguish between the press and other media for these purposes? If so, explain how and why.

19. No.

Question 8: In the light of what has now transpired about the culture, practices and ethics of the press, and the conduct of the relationship between the press and the public, the police, and politicians, is there anything further you would identify by way of the reforms that would be the most effective in addressing public concerns and restoring confidence?

20. No. I believe the restoration of public confidence rests in the hands of the politicians, police and media rather than a raft of new statutory controls. The success of journalists in bringing these issues into the public domain should be a reminder that any lapse back into the old ways will be exposed. The creation of a PCC which commands public confidence is clearly a priority.

Question 9: What influence do the media have on the content or timing of the formulation of a party's or a government's media policies? The Inquiry is particularly interested in this context in influence on the content and timing of decision-making on policies, legislation and operational questions relating to matters such as:

- a. media ownership and regulation;
- b. the economic context of media operations, including the BBC licence fee;

- c. **legal rights in areas such as freedom of expression, privacy, defamation and libel, freedom of information and data protection;**
- d. **any relevant aspects of the substantive criminal law, for example relating to any aspect of unlawfully obtaining information (including hacking, blagging and bribery) and the availability of public interest defences;**
- e. **any relevant aspects of legal procedure, such as injunctions, the reporting of proceedings, the disclosure of journalists' sources and the availability of public funding for defamation and privacy cases;**
- f. **any aspects of policing policy or operations relating to the relationship between the police and the media.**

Provide some examples.

21. I do not have any particular insight in this area of policymaking, which falls outside my main area of operation: the economy, foreign policy and No. 10 affairs.

Question 10: What influence have the media had on the formulation and delivery of government policy more generally? Cover at least the following, with examples as appropriate:

- a. **the nature of this influence, in particular whether exerted through editorial content, by direct contact with politicians, or in other ways;**
 - b. **the extent to which this influence is represented as, or is regarded as, representative of public opinion more generally or of the interests of the media themselves;**
 - c. **the extent to which that influence has advanced or inhibited the public interest.**
 - d. **The Inquiry is interested in areas such as criminal justice, European and immigration policy, where the media has on occasion run direct campaigns to influence policy, but you may be aware of others.**
22. It is difficult to prove cause and effect, but clearly the media do shape the formulation of government policy. The campaigning by Rebekah Brooks for Sarah's Law is an obvious example; the media also drove the campaign that led to the Dangerous Dogs Act. It remains unclear whether lawmaking to suit the agenda of tabloid newspapers is wise.
23. Some newspapers routinely attack the BBC (the Daily Mail and Sun being two examples) both through editorial columns but also in news stories. Clearly in both cases, one might impute a commercial interest. It is harder to prove that the BBC licence fee has been held

down directly as a result of this media pressure. This is an example where the newspapers would claim that they are also promoting the public interest: in this instance, a lower licence fee or a crackdown on perceived BBC extravagance.

24. Governments do not always bow to media campaigns. This government's planning reforms were pushed through - albeit with some amendments - in spite of a fierce campaign against them by the Daily Telegraph.
25. On the question of European policy, I would argue that British political journalism (in many cases) acts against the public interest. Having worked in Brussels for five years, it is clear to me that much of what passes for reporting of EU affairs is ill-informed and often inaccurate.
26. This is not to say that reporting should not be critical. But it is instructive to note that those newspapers which purport to have the greatest interest in EU affairs - and appear convinced that Britain is being run by eurocrats - are the least likely to have staff reporters based in Brussels. The Mail, Sun and Express are among those to fall into that category. This may be partly because the story is intrinsically boring to their readers; equally it removes the risk of reporters filing more balanced copy or - in the eyes of their newsdesks - "going native".
27. However - as with reporting of immigration matters - these editorial decisions are surely a matter of press freedom, provided they remain within the law.

Question 11: What influence have the media had on public and political appointments, including the tenure and termination of those appointments? Give examples, including of cases in which the public interest was, and was not, well served by such influence.

28. There are many instances of the media forcing ministers out of office - an example of the lobby "pack" hunting its quarry to the point of capitulation. In some cases - as with Peter Mandelson's second "resignation" - ministers are thrown overboard rather than risk further days of negative headlines, even if the case against them is unproven.
29. This is perhaps an example of the public interest not being served - Mandelson was regarded as a competent minister - but the responsibility for his sacking rested with the prime minister not the press. The same might be said of the numerous cases in the 1990s where ministers were sacked because of personal indiscretions in the "back to basics"

saga. John Major might have decided to retain those ministers, but for his spokesman's earlier insistence that these "basics" included personal morality.

30. It is often impossible to prove what influence newspapers have over public appointments. The FT, widely read in Brussels, pronounced against Tony Blair's candidature to be EU president. He did not get the job; others will judge whether that outcome was in the public interest.

Other comments

31. I have worked in the lobby at Westminster on and off since 1990 and am aware that it is an institution sometimes seen as secretive and a closed shop. There are of course weaknesses in British political journalism, but also many strengths. First, the lobby is hardly a secretive body today. When I arrived in 1990 the daily lobby briefings by the prime minister's spokesman took place in a turret room whose existence I was not allowed to disclose to outsiders; briefings were attributed to "sources close the prime minister". Now the daily briefings are on the record and attributed to the prime minister's spokesman.
32. Access to the lobby premises is restricted, but it is controlled by the Serjeant-at-Arms' office with regard to the limited space available, not a cartel operated by existing media organisations. We need passes to enter the Palace of Westminster but this is also a matter of security that applies to all staff working in the building. The lobby's "pack" mentality – and the wish not to miss a story covered by rivals – can lead to a narrowing of the range of coverage and a tendency to focus on personalities and scandals over policy development. But I would argue that the fiercely competitive nature of this working environment – the closest approximation we have today to the old Fleet Street – and the diversity of the press means that the politicians are subject to a rigorous scrutiny not seen in many democracies. I would contend that any serious corruption, illegal activity and cronyism is unlikely to last long at Westminster.
33. As to the way I operate as a political journalist, it differs little from the methods I deployed as a cub reporter in Barnstaple at the start of my career covering North Devon District Council. You get close to the politicians and officials, you find out what is going on and you put it in the public domain. I think that is how the majority of lobby correspondents operate. This is a trade. Journalists operate by trying to win the confidence of people with

information. We aim to get at the truth. In the end, I still believe that most journalists are driven by a desire to get the story and put information into the public domain.

Signed..

A rectangular box with a thin black border, used to redact the signature of George Parker.

Dated: 23rd April 2012

George Parker